

Prescribed Burning, Why?

By Andy Stevens, Natural Resources Manager

If you are traveling around Charlotte County and see plumes of smoke during this time of year, and are wondering what is going on; prescribed burning is probably the case. If you are new to the county or state you may not be aware that prescribed burning is an essential land management tool that we employ for several reasons. Most of the 4,500 acres that make up the habitats on Charlotte County's environmental lands are pyrogenic (fire-dependent) communities. If periodic burns do not occur, in the form of a prescribed burn or a wildfire, these habitats either succeed or change into conditions that do not support native plants and animals. State and federal agencies have been using prescribed burns for some time and Charlotte County staff has been implementing this land management tool to properly manage the environmental lands for over 10 years.

Staff members of the Charlotte County division of parks and natural resources have successfully completed several prescribed burns at Amberjack Environmental Park, Tippecanoe Environmental Park, Shell Creek Preserve, Charlotte Flatwoods Environmental Park, Peace River Preserve and Tippecanoe II Mitigation Area with several more planned in the coming months. A prescribed burn is a burn planned with specific set environmental parameters that must be met before the burn can take place. These parameters include wind speed, wind direction, relative humidity, burning methods, smoke sensitive areas, personnel and equipment needs. Safety is the biggest part of the planning process before any burn takes place. County staff plan and coordinate with local fire departments and the State of Florida Division of Forestry prior to and during the prescribed burns.

Prescribed burns accomplish several objectives that are set forth in the land management plans for the environmental preserves and park lands. These burns reduce the accumulation of excessive vegetation from past years of fire suppression. The reductions of the vegetation, which can be "fuels" for wildfires, help reduce the potential threat of a catastrophic wildfire, especially in environmental areas surrounded by development. Low intensity burns increase availability, quality, and quantity of native grasses that are essential for wildlife foraging while not damaging well insulated native trees such as long leaf pine and slash pine trees. Prescribed burns also assist in the reduction of hardwood trees that encroach to a point that there is a closed canopy environment that cannot support native plants and animals. The lowest growth to the ground, called understory, can be managed with the cautious use of prescribed burns to limit competition with the primary vegetation species. Managing the understory also provides browsing opportunities for wildlife and increases biodiversity. Prescribed burns are an essential tool that helps maintain our beautiful state's diversity; so our occasional smell of smoke in the air is the tradeoff for us living in the sunshine state.

If you would like to learn more about future prescribed burns at the Charlotte County environmental preserves and parks, or want to learn about other land management practices, please call Andy Stevens at 941.235.5000, or visit www.charlottecountyfl.com to learn our about great natural resources.